

Faith in the fight for sustainability; Religious and cultural groups set an example on environmentalism One in a series on what we can do to fight climate change

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Body

Lucy Cummings never has far to look to find people working together to fight climate change.

As executive director of Faith & the Common Good, a non-profit organization with chapters across Canada, she is witness to dozens of religious, cultural and spiritual groups caring for the environment.

Cummings says faith communities are a natural, yet sometimes overlooked, place in which to spark climate and environmental reform.

They bring together people with shared values, rely on a tradition of hands-on volunteerism and provide a deep sense of unity - a proven formula for working toward the greater good.

And with some 27,000 faith-based buildings in Canada, Cummings says faith groups have the numbers behind them to help push both grassroots and national action on climate change.

"We believe that whether you see a mosque or a church, a gurdwara or a synagogue, you should be able to look upon that community and see a role model for sustainability," she says. "It might be a community garden or an electric vehicle charging station, a building that models energy efficiency or one that has solar panels. All of these things can help lead us to a tipping point ... where we walk more gently on the planet."

Cummings can list dozens of examples of Canadian faith and cultural groups taking tangible steps to respond to the climate crisis.

In each case, she says, participants come away feeling joy and satisfaction in their work, something that helps ease eco-anxiety and encourages further change.

Here are three innovative and hope-filled examples of communities working toward a healthier planet.

The Ladies Eco Team, Jaffari Community Centre, Thornhill

In 2013, a group of women changed how the Jaffari Community Centre mosque, a part of Islamic Shia Ithna Asheri Jamaat of Toronto, dealt with the huge amounts of waste generated from community meals during the month of Ramadan. Instead of using Styrofoam cups and other disposable dishes for meals, the women formed dishwashing teams and asked people to bring their own dishes to the mosque. Slowly, the Ladies Eco Team transformed how the mosque - one of Toronto's largest - managed waste. (Though we don't often think about trash affecting climate change, decomposing municipal waste releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas.) Five years after they launched their dishwashing teams, the waste produced from community meals during Ramadan, which often draw

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around 2,000 people, has dropped from about 20 bags to five bags of garbage per meal. Aziza Amarshi, a founding member of the Ladies Eco Team, says their greatest achievement is changing people's mindset about environmental stewardship. "People are bringing things they learned from the community about our responsibility to the environment and taking those lessons home, and that is huge."

Nibi Emosaawdamajig - Those Who Walk For Water, Peterborough and the Kawarthas

Formed in 2010, Nibi Emosaawdamajig is an Indigenous-led group that brings together settlers and Indigenous persons to honour and protect the waterways in the region, the traditional home and territory of the Mississauga Anishinaabe Nation. Each year on Mother's Day, Nibi Emosaawdamajig organizes a water awareness walk, open to everyone in the Kawarthas community. The walk incorporates traditional Anishinaabe teachings, in which men carry the eagle staff and women carry a copper pail of water. G. Horton-Baptiste, a walk organizer, says water ceremonies are always led by women, and "song and prayer are offered up in honour and thanksgiving for the life-giving power of Nibi (Water)." Water ceremonies, she says, are symbolic of something greater and help people understand water as a living entity, which in turn shows us that humans have long-abused our water sources and taken them for granted. "Until we collectively change our actions, clean, fresh, pure water is in danger of going extinct," she says. "Change begins with one heart at a time. Each year, the ripples spread further and further."

Anglican Church of the Incarnation, Oakville

This self-described small and inclusive congregation is the first faith group in Oakville to heat and cool its building using geothermal energy. The church community decided to invest in the green technology after finding out in 2015 they needed to replace their building's outdated HVAC system. Mac Morrison, chair of the church's geothermal committee, says a detailed cost-benefit analysis showed that installing a geothermal system would save the congregation money over the long term, while putting the church on a path toward being an energy-passive building. "We're getting excellent economies," he says. "We've eliminated gas entirely from the building and our electricity bills are very low. We are really happy with the results." The church, which wants to be a role model in the community, plans to install solar panels on the building's roof within the next five years. "Our plan is to be totally energy neutral," Morrison says.

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